

# **In the vestibule with Jef Cornelis**

Michèle Thériault





These texts accompany  
the exhibition

## **In the vestibule with Jef Cornelis**

**Television programs  
directed for the Belgische  
Radio en Televisie (BRT)  
network from the 1960s  
to the 1990s**

Presented in collaboration  
with Argos, Centre  
for Art and Media  
(Brussels)

Curator  
Michèle Thériault

June 16 –  
August 12, 2016





## **Jef Cornelis and the medium of television**

Jef Cornelis is a Belgian director of a vast number of films and programs for the Flemish Belgian Radio Television network (BRT—now the VRT).<sup>1</sup> From 1964 to 1996, he directed more than 100 films on a broad array of topics related to the areas of contemporary culture and art, Flemish landscape and architecture, literature and music. These films and programs are compelling to us today for their experimentation with the televisual format, technique and style, their choice of subject matter and in the way debate and conflict played out. Indeed, many are outrightly prescient. This is all the more surprising for a contemporary viewer, in that they were all produced by a public television network and not independently, something that would be unthinkable today.

Although Cornelis studied at the Film Academy in Amsterdam it was his experience living away from Antwerp, his hometown, and his interest in French cinema at the time that impelled him to pursue film work. He was 22 when he

1. Extensive information on and analysis of Cornelis's work for television is available online at ARGOS, Centre for Arts and Media (Brussels), which has the Cornelis's television archive for viewing [www.argosarts.org](http://www.argosarts.org).

See also *Inside the White Tube: a Retrospective View on the Television Work of Jef Cornelis* curated by Andrea Cinel <http://expo.argosarts.org/?lang=EN>.

Another rich source of information is the research website created by Koen Brams <http://jefcornelis.be>.

was hired by the Artistic and Educational Programmes section of the BRT in Brussels where he was soon given free rein to make a film about the Park Abbey (*Abdij van Park Heverlee*, 1964) near Leuven, one in a number of prize-winning films that reveal an incisive and probing use of the camera in its dislocation of the subject from centre stage in favour of what exceeded, escaped or was marginal to it—a strategy that marked his whole career. Cornelis was a great admirer of Alexandre Astruc who coined the term *caméra stylo* as defining an auteur theory of filmmaking that would become associated with the cinema of the Nouvelle Vague. He does indeed use the camera to turn architectural details, volumes and passages into the protagonists of his film, as he would with artworks and artistic contexts, thus giving his subjects an autonomy that is pressed onto the viewer.

Cornelis was motivated by a relentless curiosity for the medium of television and its communicative properties and formats combined with a profoundly inquiring mind. Topics ranged from featuring contemporary art and events, architectural heritage, urban planning, bodybuilding, sentimentalism, exoticism, magazine culture, parapsychology, musical associations, cultural policy, intoxication and trance music. Fascinated by different forms of knowledge and social constructs and how they intersect with contemporary culture and society, he explored the televisual format to stage, frame or give free rein to their encounter in a critical and often provocative manner. His desire to foster debate, to render here and now the crux of an exchange, and to bring image and place together lead him to realize live films and programs using satellite links in the 1980s, such as in the series *Icebreakers* (*Ijsbreker*, 1983-84) and in the marathon six hours film *The Longest Day* (*De langste dag*, 1986).

Cornelis was extraordinarily single-minded in imposing his way of working and his concept of how a topic or subject should be broached in film whether the project was assigned

or proposed by him to the network.<sup>2</sup> He negotiated earnestly to obtain what he deemed essential (multiple mobile camera crews used for sports events; filming from a helicopter; using satellite links; creating a new program format; using different film stock; building unusual film sets; working with a specific technician, scriptwriter or commentator). The success of a project was dependent on the team he was able to put together and its commitment to his approach. Intense and rich intellectual exchanges with a constellation of collaborators with whom he worked repeatedly were crucial to giving shape to the complexity of his framework and discourse. He developed long-term relationships with the architectural historian and critic Geert Bekaert with whom he made socially critical urban films, the writer Georges Adé who probingly interviewed artists in many of his films on exhibitions and large events, the teacher and curator Chris Dercon, who provided him with scripts and an investigative approach to his subjects and Bart Vershaffel a polemical philosopher who co-hosted the controversial and ill-fated *Container* talk-show series along with the art historian Lieven de Cauter.

Although he was not always successful at realizing his projects—the interviews done by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau with Cornelis (available at the research website [jefcornelis.be](http://jefcornelis.be)) attest to how politics at the network did not always play in his favour—the BRT nevertheless offered him, for over thirty years, by way of a scattering of supportive superiors and colleagues, a space of his own in which he was able to explore the televisual medium as a critical site for experimentation. The BRT at its

2. See the interviews collected by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau: <http://jefcornelis.be/interviews.php> and particularly “No Question that Television Equals Politics” on the battle to realize the series *Container*: [http://jefcornelis.be/interview\\_06.php](http://jefcornelis.be/interview_06.php).



creation in the early 60s shared the utopian values of public broadcasting endeavours at the time practicing openness and improvisation within a society that was questioning institutions, social conventions and colonial power well into the 70s. Over the years the possibilities for critical experimentation disappeared and Cornelis left the BRT after realizing his last film *The Colours of the Mind* (*De Kleuren van de geest*) in 1997.

Cornelis refuses the term director to define his work and rightly so. He was a *realisator*: a maker of films and, as a number of critics have stated, a televisual essayist. In his practice he *actively* worked through ideas—something we can hardly say about any television network director today—one that was engaged and took position in relation to the viewer and the conventions and limitations of his medium, and that let conflict, irresolution and indeed failure be constitutive elements of his work.

In the last decade, his work has been increasingly presented and discussed in the context of contemporary art (ironically there is very little place for it in television today): in art academies and museum symposia and in significant exhibition contexts, notably *Inside the White Tube: A Retrospective View on the Television Work of Jef Cornelis* (ARGOS, 2016), *In Focus: Jef Cornelis* at the Liverpool Biennial (2014), *Barely There, Part 1* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2011) and *Are You Ready for TV?* at MACBA Museu d'art contemporani (2011, Barcelona). Many of his programs do indeed address contemporary art, artists, exhibitions, cultural policy and events and are, from today's perspective, significant for what they reveal about exhibition making, artistic ethos, and the politics of events. However, this work should be experienced and studied in the context of Cornelis's entire output particularly by artists, curators, academics and the wide community of cultural workers because of how he opened up for himself, and others, a space for a counter-practice within the communicational technology of his time.







## Programmes and commentaries

Five programmes presented  
from Monday to Friday  
10:30 to 5:00 pm  
26 films playing continuously  
on two monitors

Please consult  
[ellengallery.concordia.ca](http://ellengallery.concordia.ca)  
for viewing schedule

Cornelis's early films on artists, often in a solo exhibition context (at Wide White Space and at A379089 for example) done between 1968 and 1972 after which he stopped working on contemporary art to take it up again in 1983. Included is an inquiry on the state of art teaching at three institutions and an early documentary on the collecting practices of three Belgian collectors.

1. **Marcel Broodthaers °1924, 1972**  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
5 min. 6 sec.  
Dutch and French; English subtitles

On September 27, 1968, the Belgian poet, filmmaker and artist Marcel Broodthaers opened his fictional *Musée d'Art Moderne - Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle* (Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department, Section of the 19th Century) in his house in Brussels on Rue de la Pépinière. The museum then appeared in various guises and at a variety of venues until 1972, when Broodthaers permanently closed it after opening his *Galerie du XXème Siècle* (Gallery of the 20th Century) against the backdrop of *Documenta V* (September 1 - October 8, 1972) in Kassel.

At the press conference where he announced the closure of the museum, Broodthaers declared: "A fiction allows to grasp the truth and at the same time to understand what is hidden behind the truth." Cornelis's film opens with Broodthaers sitting at the entrance of his exhibition (*Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures: Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute*, May 15 - July 9, 1972) in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

At the exhibition he presented more than 300 objects and images that related to "The eagle from the Oligocene to the Present." Broodthaers made use of museographical aesthetics and methods to underline how these can convert everyday objects into ones that have a mythical dimension. But in many of these ensembles he also incorporated a notice stating: "This is not a work of art."

Cornelis first introduces the artist's practice and preoccupations, then Broodthaers guides us through his exhibition, discussing with the reporter Georges Adé what turns an object into art—or why it does not turn into art. ARGOS

2. **Marcel Broodthaers: Musée d'art du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle**, 1969  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
4 min. 58 sec.  
Dutch and French; English subtitles

Cornelis films the closing of Broodthaers' *Musée d'art du XIX<sup>e</sup>me Siècle - Département des aigles du Musée d'Art Moderne* in his residence in Brussels by the director of the Zeeuws Museum of Middleburg Piet van Daalen, the trip to Antwerp that followed and the opening by Piet van Daalen and guests (Johannes Cladders, Herman Daled) of *Section du XVII<sup>e</sup>me siècle - Département des Aigles* at the exhibition space A379089 (co-founded among others by Cornelis and Kaspar König). Cornelis makes visible how Broodthaers integrated the vocabulary of museum display and conservation—crates, inscriptions, display vitrines, identification—in his practice and how collectors, curators and museums re-enacted their roles.

3. **Jacques Charlier, 1972**  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
4 min. 56 sec.  
French; English subtitles

The Belgian artist Jacques Charlier's artworks criticize, both conceptually and aesthetically, *Pop Art* and *Nouveau Réalisme*. He looked at his own reality and showed it as it is. Charlier worked for several years at the *Provincial Technical Service (STP)* in Liège. This experience influenced his artistic practice as he started to decontextualize STP photographs and documents, namely images of the town, roads, drain pipes and water supply schemes, and present them in different exhibition projects. The exhibition *Documents du STP* (Documents of the STP) took place at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1972.

In Cornelis's film, we first notice the exit of an office building and then Charlier explaining why this situation is important for him and what his position as an artist is. As he states: "I make myself a sort of intermediary between things that really happen and the world of art." His mediation shows people what they can understand; Charlier considers this as an important document because in our contemporary society, leaving a factory or an office is a common and normal action. ARGOS



4. **Daniel Buren, 1971**

16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
5 min. 40 sec.  
Dutch and French, English  
subtitles

An incisive and clearheaded analyst of the art scene, Daniel Buren participated in a number of Cornelis's films on artistic events. Georges Adé interviews the French artist on the occasion of his solo exhibition—simply entitled *Buren* (11 May - 5 June, 1971)—in front of the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp. Buren applied his motif, namely the alternation of white and coloured 8.7cm wide stripes, inside and outside the gallery along the sidewalk on the front façade of the gallery.

In the film, fragments of the interview alternate with views of the exhibition. Adé assumes the part of the man or woman in the street and asks simple, but sharp questions that explore the foundation of Buren's aesthetics and conceptual framework. Buren explains his practice, his position regarding the art market, the way his work relates to the environment—outside and inside the gallery—and how the public should experience his installation. Contrasting with these reflections and concerns, are Cornelis's images of people walking on the sidewalk next to the gallery. The passers-by ignore Buren's site-specific installation.

5. **Drie blinde muizen**

(*Three Blind Mice*), 1968  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
38 min. 57 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

*The Three Blind Mice* of the English nursery rhyme run free until the farmer's wife cuts off their tails with a carving knife. *Three Blind Mice* was the title of an exhibition at the van Abbemuseum of three important collectors (Fritz Becht, Hubert Peeters and Martin Visser) of primarily American and European Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art at the time. Cornelis films them in their living room, eating with their family at the dinner table, in the company of their children and beside their silent wives talking about their reasons for collecting, how they started and constructed their collection, and their relationship to the artists. This film conveys to us today a different, understated fascination for art that seems oddly to leave behind (or hide) the logic of the market and the dynamic of wealth.



6. **James Lee Byars, Antwerpen 18 April - 7 May 1969, 1969**  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
32 min. 30 sec.  
English

Cornelis shows views of the American artist James Lee Byars's exhibition at White Wide Space in Antwerp preceded by a procession of participants clothed in white fabric. Byars talks with Walter Van Dijk about his practice and the influence of Shintoism and poetry from a decade spent in Japan, and his youth and travels in the United States. Cornelis's direction steadily and quietly reveals Byars's obsessive quest for perfection and beauty through repetitive gestures and the ritual of joining together in elaborate and measured collective performances.

7. **James Lee Byars, World Question Center, 1969**  
Video, B&W, 1 hr. 3 min. 28 sec.  
English

In 1969, Byars conceived a work called *The World Question Center*, which consisted of an attempt to collect questions from some of the '100 most brilliant minds' of the time. On November 28, 1968 this performance was broadcast live on BRT. The artist asked the same question—namely "Could you present us a question that you feel is pertinent with regard to the evolution of your own knowledge?"—to a number of intellectuals, artists and scientists. A circle of men and women wearing an outfit designed by the artist surrounded him on the set. His various interlocutors were either present in the room or contacted over the phone during the broadcast.

The programme was presumably recorded simultaneously on one 2" tape and on two 1" Philips tapes (VPL 8 in. IC 1800 ft.), an early use of video technology on television. In 2001, one of the original 1" tapes from the collection of Herman Daled was digitized and restored by Argos and Packed, Centre of Expertise in Digital Heritage (Brussels) in collaboration with AV Works (Haarlem). ARGOS

8. **Richard Hamilton, 1971**  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
36 min. 30 sec.  
Dutch and English,  
English subtitles

Cornelis films an artist talk by Richard Hamilton at his exhibition at the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels in 1971. The talk is preceded by a five-minute montage with sound in which the camera meanders through works by Hamilton. The artist describes his relationship to representation and his use of photography and painting. He exposes his manner of working by describing the process of intervening on a polaroid series of himself taken by Francis Bacon that he tries to render in the manner of Bacon (who, at the request of Hamilton but on the advice of his dealer, refuses to transform "into" Bacons). Through attempts and failures Hamilton explores all at once the question of art making at the intersection of skill, originality, the copy, appropriation, style, value and authorship. As Hamilton later discusses the distinction between Fine Arts and popular art by referring to Warhol, Cornelis integrates his own film from 1970 on a Warhol exhibition.

Cornelis captures Hamilton's fidgeting as he stands awkwardly before his audience in the middle of the gallery. The camera moves around him to focus on the audience and the filming apparatus repeatedly appears in the frame. At the end the audience has left and Hamilton, complicit with the technical team, smiles and asks, "Is that enough?"

9. **3 x Kunstonderwijs**  
(3 X *Teaching Art*), 1983  
(broadcast in 1987)  
Vimeo, colour, 1 hr. 3 min. 46 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

Jef Cornelis wanted to make a film about art education. Developed with Chris Dercon, a frequent collaborator during those years, and in conversations with Dan Graham, Daniel Buren and John Baldessari who were all art teachers, the film was realized under the condition that Cornelis could get the outdoor broadcasting vehicle used for sports events and three cameramen and sound technicians. Cornelis felt that only this set up would give him the freedom to accommodate a complex context of students, teachers, directors, guest artists and curators all interacting at once.

With Chris Dercon as a guide, Cornelis had three artists (Panamarenko, Guillaume Bijl and Willy van Sompel), three art critics (Lieven de Cauter, Adriaan van Raemdonck and Bart Verschaffel), three gallery owners (Joost Declercq, Benoit Angelet and Annie De Decker) and three museum directors (Jan Debbaut, Jan Hoet and Wilfried Huet) pass half a day in the offices and studios of three higher art education institutions (the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Gent; the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp; the Sint Lucas Higher Art Institute in Brussels). Chris Dercon boldly poses uncomfortable questions and makes ironic comments. The conversations between the artists, curators, directors and teachers reveal, at times, an antiquated system, a lack of experimentation and confused or frustrated students.

10. **Daniel Buren (Palais Royal)**, 1986  
16 mm transferred to video,  
colour, 18 min. 16 sec.  
Dutch and French; English subtitles

For the installation *Les Deux Plateaux* (*The Two Levels*, 1985 – 1986), Daniel Buren placed a grid of 260 black and white striped cylinders of different heights in the elegant courtyard of the Palais Royal in Paris. The installation, commonly referred to as *Buren's Columns*, turns the venue into a sort of chessboard. Moreover, it establishes a dialectic between the ground level of the courtyard and the level underneath, and changes in light permit the installation to be perceived differently through the day.

This film alternates between views of the installation *Les Deux Plateaux* and an interview with Daniel Buren: who is very precise about how he relates to his site-specific work. After analyzing the general constraints of the site, he formulates a response to it: the 260 cylinders provide a sort of visual echo to the columns surrounding the courtyard and create a three-dimensional space without obscuring the existing architecture. Or, as he puts it, "the location (outside or inside) where a work is seen is its frame (its boundary)."

Ironically, the aesthetic analysis of Buren's intervention at the site was overshadowed by a lawsuit and mounting public passion—from the announcement of Buren's project in July 1985 until the conclusion of the trial in December 1992, there were endless discussions about the work. The installation became a battlefield between local and national authorities, occasioning hostile arguments between left- and right-wing politicians, leading to debates in the Council of State and the French Parliament, and a lawsuit in a Paris Court. In 1986 alone *Les Deux Plateaux* was the subject of 225 articles and forty-five different reviews. ARGOS

11. **Little Sparta, et in Arcadia ego**, 1988  
Video, colour, 41 min. 45 sec.  
English spoken

This was Cornelis's last film with Chris Dercon and one made because another film with James Coleman could not be made. Cornelis's interest was in Finlay's garden *Little Sparta* whereas Dercon was more interested in understanding his complex use of symbols and references in his work (Finlay was at the center of a controversy at that time concerning a commission in Paris for the Bicentenary of the French Revolution.)

How you enter a film is important for Cornelis, and this one opens with a call made to Finlay from a red telephone box on the side of a country road in Ireland. The visit was made in the late fall in the cold when the garden was covered with frost. The sound track that accompanies the visit is ominous creating a tense atmosphere as Finlay takes them around the garden.

The film ends with Finlay angry with Dercon for posing the questions of his relationship to the Third Reich in his work, which Finlay considered unfair and a form of professional abuse. Finlay never gave his permission to air the film and although it was never shown on television it was presented in an exhibition context in 1991.



## Programme 2

1 film, duration: 6 hrs. 20 min.

### 1. De langste dag

(*The Longest Day*), 1986

Video, colour, 6 hrs. 15 min. 48 sec.

Dutch, French, English, Italian;

English subtitles

June 21 1986. With over six hours of live television—hosted in the BRT studio in Brussels by the Belgian curator Chris Dercon, the Italian critic Germano Celant and the Greek theorist Denys Zacharopoulos—the programme *De Langste Dag* (*The Longest Day*) was one of the main elements of the art manifestation *Initiatief '86*, an amalgam of exhibitions simultaneously unfolding at several venues in the city of Ghent. *Initiatief '86* came about when a dozen of Ghent art associations and galleries started a project for which three international curators—the French Jean-Hubert Martin, the Dutch Gosse Oosterhof and the German Kasper König—were invited to make their personal selection from contemporary visual arts in Belgium. This resulted in three exhibitions at the St. Peter's Abbey. Jan Hoet, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, developed a second component to this project, namely *Chambres d'amis*, for which he invited fifty Belgian and international artists to create a work in as many private homes as possible. The participating organizations also seized the opportunity to develop their own activities. The Museum of Contemporary Art exhibited its collection for an international public and the Belgian artist Wilfried Huet set up an event of his own with a number of colleagues at the socio-cultural centre Vooruit, entitled *Initiatief d'amis*.

Amidst these activities, Cornelis set up a network of satellite links during the opening: this enabled artists, organizers, critics and the public to act and interact live through the medium of television. Remarkably, this circuit was based on one helicopter and two mobile camera teams that set up at several locations. The programme did not adopt a point of view on contemporary art as its starting point, but rather an idea about the way images work. Art can suggest, suppose and create assumptions, so how about television? Does art tolerate live television and vice versa? The programme refuses to catalogue art and it does not offer explanations or guidelines, creating instead an open communication model geared towards action and activity, reflection and discussion, intervention and reaction. It visualizes without being reproductive, without being an image or representation. It does display, however, its own activity as a visual medium, an activity that does not express itself in signs of cultural value, but in images of an audiovisual culture. ARGOS

Cornelis's filmic commentaries on important large-scale international exhibitions such as *Documenta 4* (1968) and 5 (1972), *Sonsbeek 86*, the *Munster Skulptur Projekt* (1987) and the *Paris Biennale* (1985) reveal the politics and tensions that shape those events. Included is a round table on the state of the arts in Belgium led by Chris Dercon.

*In these documentaries on Documenta 4 and 5, Cornelis conceptualizes a way of appropriating the event, sidestepping and questioning the definitions of exhibition makers, but also of the medium of television as a subject. He undermines the authoritarian position offered to him by his medium and he impels the spectator to judge for him or herself. His stance is the one of the inquiring visitor. The commentary is spare; put into perspective and completed with accompanying interviews. In doing so Cornelis avoided a perspective clouded by mystifications and myth building.*

1. **Documenta 4**, 1968

16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
53 min. 19 sec.

Dutch, French, English, German;  
English subtitles

When *Documenta 4* takes place in 1968 the international art world is entangled in an authority crisis. At the time, artistic director Arnold Bode saw things differently. *Documenta 4* was overcome with controversy and debate. The politicization of society in the late 1960s made itself felt in Kassel—red flags and groups chanting slogans meant that the opening speeches could not be held. The place occupied by American artists was also criticized. Moreover, *Documenta 4* was

going through an internal generational conflict and a debate on the fragile relationship of aesthetic judgment and democratic forms of reaching a consensus. In interviews with Sol Lewitt, Joseph Beuys, Harald Szeemann, Allen Jones, Christo, Martial Raysse and Robert Rauschenberg, among others, Cornelis and interviewer Karel Geirlandt act the everyman and situate themselves on the side of the bewildered spectator.



## 2. Documenta 5, 1972

16 mm transferred to video, B&W and colour, 53 min. 19 sec.  
Dutch, French, English, German;  
English subtitles

*Documenta 5* in 1972 could have gone into history as the first instance of an exhibition as a spectacle. Directed by Harald Szeemann from Switzerland, art made its way back to the museum. The main issue at hand was the economic, political and media significance of the event for Kassel. It was as if the avant-garde was buried for good. The significance potential of art was individualized and proclaimed a matter of the artists on the one hand—envisioned as individual mythologists—and a responsibility of the curator on the other. Artist-curator on one side, artist-professional on the other: this constellation was to determine the Documentas in the decades to come. Although this film brings an outlook on trends of the moment, such as conceptual art and kitsch, it can't be considered merely as a report of a historical event: it is also a possible approach to the phenomenon of 'Documenta' as a whole.

*Texts by Yves Aupetitallot from the set of DVDs co-produced by bdv (bureau des vidéos) (Paris) with Argos, Centre for Art and Media (Brussels), JRP|Ringier (Zurich) and Le Magasin (Grenoble), with the support of the Centre national des Arts plastiques (Paris).*

## 3. Beeldende kunst in België

(*Visual Arts in Belgium*), 1986,  
Video, colour, 58 min. 42 sec.  
Dutch, French, English;  
English subtitles

The programme *Beeldende kunst in België, 1986* (*Visual Art in Belgium, 1986*) is a recording of a panel discussion that took place in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. To a certain extent, the programme is a prequel to *De langste dag* (1986). Chris Dercon leads an international panel in which renowned art curators and critics participate, namely Barry Barker, Bernard Blistène, Laurent Busine, Bice Curiger, Jan Debbaut, Frans Haks, Jan Hoet, Kasper König, Bernard Marcelis, Jean-Hubert Martin and Wim Van Mulders.

As all of them are involved to a different extent with Belgian art, they are asked to discuss and answer an apparently fundamental question: "What is the significance of the phenomenon of visual arts in Belgium in 1986?" But the story turns out to be more complicated. Dercon asks the panel members to put the new interest in Belgian art in a broader context and to evaluate the promotional tools that the regional governments have set up: Did curators and critics change their view of Belgian art? Or is it due to a new approach of the Belgian artistic scene? Or is it a matter of the quality of the works of art? In the end how can one define an artistic scene nationally? ARGOS

4. **Spaziergaenger mit Hund**  
(*Walker with dog*) – **Sonsbeek 86**,  
1986  
Video, colour and B&W,  
30 min. 18 sec.  
Dutch, English; English subtitles

*Sonsbeek 1986* begins with *Sonsbeek 1971*, also filmed by Cornelis, and it shows very poor black and white images of the opening ceremony shot directly off television. Cornelis confused temporalities by seamlessly joining *Sonsbeek 1971* with another edition of *Sonsbeek*, fifteen years later scripted by Chris Dercon. In 1971, Cornelis films conversation and protest over the elitism and costs of the event, along with artists explaining their work (Oldenburg, Buren, Smithson). In 1986, he films in full colour and with only ambient sound a succession of objects isolated in the landscape and identified by running texts at the bottom of the frame, only Dercon in a single instance enters the frame and presents a glass sculpture by Dan Graham. The reportage ends with an interview by Dercon with *Sonsbeek* curator Saskia Bos. The subjects are fiction and the transparency of glass, an element of many projects at *Sonsbeek*. ARGOS

5. **Een Openbar bad voor Munster**  
(*A Public Pool for Munster*) 1987  
Video, colour, 40 min.  
Dutch, German, English;  
English subtitles

Cornelis films another large-scale artistic event with Chris Dercon as scriptwriter, and focuses on the artwork but through the mediation of the artist and *flâneur* Christian-Philipp Müller who walks from one work to another contextualising each one and its site within local German history. Each work is a narrative overlaid with a sometimes more troubled history. At intervals, a dancer interacts with some of the sculptures. The film ends on an interview by Dercon with Klaus Bussman and Kaspar König, the director of *Skulptur Project* in his office discussing publicness, the fragmented condition of the artist, the unpopularity of such a project and the dialogue with the museum. All the while in the background Müller seated at a desk, seems to be doing his accounts.

## 6. **Biennale van Parijs**

(*Biennale of Paris*), 1985

Video, colour, 1 hr. 7 min. 40 sec.

Dutch, English, German,

French, Italian and Spanish;

English subtitles

For the first time the Paris Biennale was held in 1985 at the recently opened Grande Halle in the new Parc de la Villette—the thirteenth edition since its creation in 1959. Organized by an international team of curators and art critics including Georges Boudaille and Gérard Gassiot-Talabot (French), Kasper König (German), Alanna Heiss (American) and Achille Bonito Oliva (Italian), the Biennale was a platform for both established and up-and-coming artists active in the mid-1980s such as Georg Baselitz, Daniel Buren, Richard Deacon, Keith Haring, David Hockney, Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, Bertrand Lavier and Lawrence Weiner—most of them filmed installing their work. Cornelis is both interested in the location of the Biennale at the newly designed open park on the site of the old Abattoirs and by the politics of an event such as this. He lets the curators and the artists speak freely thus revealing strategic maneuvering, differences and tensions. He documents the conversations held during the preparatory phases of the event about the revival of figurative art, the role of museums and television, the individual nature of artistic experience, and reveals more specifically the strategies employed by the organizers to address the stakes and debates at the moment of this event.

*Text by Yves Aupetitallot from the set of DVDs co-produced by bdv (bureau des vidéos) (Paris) with Argos, Centre for Art and Media (Brussels), JRP|Ringier (Zurich) and Le Magasin (Grenoble), with the support of the Centre national des Arts plastiques (Paris).*



## Programme 4

4 films, duration: 4 hrs. 10 min.

Two television series initiated by Cornelis in which he experimented with format: *Ijsbreker (Icebreaker)* (1983-1984) that ran for 22 episodes and the controversial *Container* (1989) that was canceled after 10 episodes. Their aim was to foster a free debate of ideas.

*In the series Ijsbreker (Icebreaker, 1983-1984), Jef Cornelis used satellite links— an advanced technology at that time— as a way to render the play between various ideas and discussions and to experiment with unconventional televisual frameworks. Three locations and as many participants were confronted to one another in a discussion on a contemporary topic. Cornelis wanted to achieve simultaneity in time and image. This resulted in a creative confusion. Because conversations were taking place in different locations, control was quickly lost and digressions rife thus leaving the spectator confused and lost.*

1. **Ijsbreker 01 : Panamarenko**  
(*Icebreaker 01: Panamarenko*), 1983  
Video, colour, 48 min. 48 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

This first broadcast in the series *Ijsbreker* was devoted to the artist Panamarenko. Cornelis featured Panamarenko frequently in his programs on art. The artist who built flying machines that were widely exhibited at the time, was fascinated by aeronautics and magnetic fields. Panamarenko and his mother were filmed at the artist's workspace in Antwerp, the author Georges Adé at his home in Michelen with Herman Roelants, philosopher of science, and Charles Hirschfield, professor of thermodynamics in the studio in Brus-

sels interfacing with the two live feeds. Panamarenko presented his research on magnetism while Hirschfield, Adé and Roelants, somewhat perplexed and hesitant, offered comments and questions. The program reveals Panamarenko's elusive, child-like single-mindedness as he selectively answers or redirects questions or comments. The program format puts forth an early attempt at opening up art making to other disciplines and registers of thought.

2. **Ijsbreker 16 : Lichamen – Toonbeelden** (*Icebreaker 16: The Body – Model Images*), 1984  
Video, colour, 71 min. 34 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

*Icebreaker 16: The Body – Model Images* explores the topic of “body culture”. During the live broadcast three different sites are connected with satellite links: a center for bodybuilding, a photo shoot for a fashion magazine, and the studio in Brussels, where the Belgian philosopher Rit Van den Bergh questions a culture which she feels is lapsing into narcissism and imitative behaviour. The programme is conceived as a comparative study of a number of aspects of contemporary body culture, and focuses in particular on the opposition between the “decorative” world of fashion models and the “muscular and healthy” world of bodybuilders. It all quickly turns into an unreal clash between various subjective positions and mind frames.

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3. **Ijsbreker 19 : Verzamelen van kunstvoorwerpen** (*Icebreaker 19: Collecting Art Objects*), 1984  
Video, colour, 1 hr. 8 min. 50 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

In this episode two collectors are brought together—one a painter who is a collector of Japanese swords in Antwerp, the other an art photographer who collects vernacular objects in Eindhoven—with an art historian and restorer from the Royal Institute of Artistic Heritage and an art dealer specializing in Japanese Netsuke both located in Studio 3 of the BRT in Brussels. Each collector tells the story of why and how he collects revealing very different attitudes. Awkwardly the collector of vernacular art barely addresses the subject in his single-minded determination to discuss his own photographic practice. This results in the other guests calling him to order and embarrassing interruptions. The disjunctive exchanges address questions of fetishism, pleasure, expertise, knowledge, authenticity, forgeries, and market value.



*The series Container (1989) became a legendary television programme because of its format, the openness of the debate and its intellectualism. The subject of sustained criticism it was removed from the air after 10 episodes. Cornelis created a self-contained structure namely a container, with one side thrown open, which he had designed by the architect Stéphane Beel and set up in a studio. It was a lab for ideas and debate on the most wide ranging of cultural and philosophical topics led by the philosophers Lieven de Cauter and Bart Verschaffel that usually ended in an inconclusive manner. Cornelis had it broadcast late at night, "at a time no one wanted, the non-time of television."*

#### 4. **Container 10 : Exotismen**

(*Container 10: Exoticism*), 1989  
Video, colour, 57 min. 36 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

The last episode of the series is about exoticism. In the panel discussion the philosopher Lieven De Cauter, the historian Eddy Stols, the anthropologist Paul Vandenbroeck and the philosopher Bart Verschaffel discuss the predominantly Western fascination with exotic cultures communicating very different attitudes and viewpoints on the subject.

Exoticism often gets in the way of an objective understanding of other cultures and is also considered an intellectually incorrect term. It confirms and reproduces deep-rooted stereotypes and representations, it creates dream worlds that influence our perspective, making us see things the way we want to see them. Accordingly, we can consider exoticism as intercultural counterfeiting. Is exoticism a projection mechanism for repressed fears and longings? Might exotic objects be perceived both as documents of barbarism and

documents of culture? Are exoticism and racism branches that grow on the same tree? Is exoticism at the root of its own caricature? Is it fundamentally possible to move beyond exoticism?

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## Programme 5

4 films, duration: 3 hrs. 25 min.

Four films realized in the 70s and the 90s that show Cornelis's broad range of interests (from the social meaning and impact of the street and the highway to the hybrid culture of Brazil) including Cornelis's last film for the BRT on the phenomenon of trance music *De Kleuren van de geest* (*The Colours of the Mind*, 1997).

1. **De straat** (*The Street*), 1972  
16 mm transferred to video, B&W,  
39 min. 30 sec.  
English

With sound and image, Jef Cornelis and screenwriter Geert Bekaert, with whom he made a number of architectural and "landscape" films, evoke the deterioration of the street, once public, into a fragment of an unnatural, ruthless production system. This film is related to the exhibition *De Straat. Vorm van samenleven* (*The street. A way of living together*) that took place at the van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven from June 2 to September 24, 1972. The exhibition assigned a central role to 'the user'. It was hoped that raising issues concerning the environment and the way it was planned and designed, would activate public awareness and participation in cultural and social processes. The street was an expression and manifestation of society itself, and it is probably for this reason that Cornelis refused to take part to the exhibition and instead proposed to broadcast (precisely on September 14, 1972) his film on Flemish television. As a result, the exhibition was not confined to the walls of the museum, reaching out over the airwaves in order to involve television in an actual social process. ARGOS

2. **Rijksweg N1** (*Highway N1*), 1978  
16 mm transferred to video, colour  
and B&W, 42 min. 45 sec.  
Dutch; English subtitles

One in a series of films in which Cornelis used helicopter shots to enhance the camera's exploration of context and the relationships between places and views. *Highway N1* links Antwerp to Brussels, a road well-traveled, which has undergone profound changes over time. Cornelis and Geert Bekaert, muse on the social, cultural and political effects of the highway focusing on the stretch between Kontich and Mechelen. Cornelis and Bekaert divided the film in seven parts each addressing in a commentary its distinctive ecology (doors and windows, its non-motor related activities) or its relationship to the environment (boundary, what lies beyond, its edges). The resulting filmic essay is both philosophical and political in its montage of images and words. The highway embeds itself in the landscape, shaping lives and social practices while it appears to deplete the social and cultural fabric of communities.

3. **Pau Brasil : Je vindt niet, wat je zoekt** (*Brazilwood: 'You don't find what you are looking for'*), 1992  
Video, colour, 57 min. 14 sec.  
Portuguese; English subtitles

"You don't find what you're looking for" is a phrase that is found on an artwork by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. It captures the difficulty of defining Brazilian culture, its particular hybridity in its long relationship with European and Portuguese cultures. Conceived at the time of the exhibition *American Bride of the Sun* at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp this project was realized by Cornelis with Chris Dercon, who wrote the script. Developed around a series of Europeans and Brazilian texts attempting to define Brazil read by Brazilian artists, writers or critics, the film is interspersed and overlaid with music, still images of early representations of Brazilian natives and landscapes, film clips of contemporary cinema (among which an early Levi-Strauss ethnographic film shot on location), contemporary art works, views of Sao Paulo and its biennial. The film, in its subtle juxtapositions and camera work, gives expression to the formal and social tensions in which Brazilian culture finds itself and communicates the contingent nature of a hybrid identity.

4. **De Kleuren van de geest** (*The Colours of the Mind*), 1997  
Video, colour and B&W, 42 min.  
39 sec. (format 16:9)  
Dutch; English subtitles

*De kleuren van de geest* (*The colours of the mind*) was broadcast on October 28, 1997, and was Cornelis's final programme for the BRT. A visual essay about trance in music, iconography and disembodiment in history, Cornelis meanders through epochs and regions, cultures and artistic practices. He refers to old prints with horrifying spiders and melodies as antidote to their bites, as well as to the European paintings of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries that depict Moorish dances, the Southern Italian *Tarantella* and the Northern African *Gnawa music*.

Is there a link between contemporary electronic dance music and the various kinds of healing rituals that are inherent to traditional folk dances? In the 1990s, *Trance music*—"trance" referring in this instance to a state of hypnotism and heightened consciousness—was a genre of electronic music that became an international phenomenon. It seems that attempts are made to breathe new life into the ancient art of healing making use of innovative technological equipment. All in all, the ancient European dances, the still active North-African esoteric systems and the recent techno rituals are expressions of a single desire: to be possessed. In some way, today dancing becomes again a way to abandon one's body and to link the mind to a 'Greater Unity.' ARGOS



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Karine Cossette

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**LEONARD & BINA ELLEN ART GALLERY**  
**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**

1400 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West, LB-165  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8  
[ellen.artgallery@concordia.ca](mailto:ellen.artgallery@concordia.ca)  
[ellengallery.concordia.ca](http://ellengallery.concordia.ca)